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## **The Changing Patterns and Lived Experiences of Women Pursuing Higher Education Post-marriage in India**

By Satarupa Dutta<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study explores from a phenomenological stand point, the lived experiences of thirty Indian women and struggle to pursue higher education post marriage. It encompasses the life-worlds of two distinct generations—women who had achieved higher education post-marriage, at least 20 years ago (pre-1994); and married women who are currently enrolled with a university. Using the life course perspectives' concept of time and social ecology, the experiences of these women have been analysed thematically to understand the changing patterns in these women's perception of a) self which includes identification with oneself, individual behaviour, motivational level, multiple roles management, concept of space and boundary and self-assertion; and b) environment which encompasses their interaction with the social environment, the available support systems and dynamics associated with it.

*Key Words:* Women and higher education, marriage, Indian women, life course

### **Introduction**

Different genres of scholars from feminist theorists to economists have always pointed out that family obligations play a key role in women's career decisions (Hartmann, 1981; Moen, 1991; Wattis & James, 2013). But in recent times, a significant deconstruction of women's experiences of power, sexuality, reproduction and work within the family structure has attracted multiple researchers (Parikh & Shah, 1994; Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004; Palanivel & Sinthuja, 2012). This study uses the life course perspective to unravel lived experiences of women and their struggle to achieve higher education post marriage.

### **Life Course Perspective**

The life course approach was first traced to the pioneering work of Thomas' and Znaniecki's 'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America' and Mannheim's essay on the 'Problem of generations' (Elder et al. 2003). The theoretical construct primarily defines the relationship of human behaviour and environment in the cycle of time. It looks at the transitions in a person's life from birth to death and focuses on the impact of various biological, psychological, social and economic factors. According to Hutchinson (2010), there are five basic concepts associated with the life course perspective—cohorts (a generational group of people of a given culture who experienced specific social changes at the same age and in same sequence), transitions (change in one's role and status which is distinct from the previous ones), trajectories (long term patterns of constancy and change), life events (a major incident involving a sudden change with a serious

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impact and long term effects) and turning point (life event or transition that generates lasting shift in the life course trajectory). These concepts are the keys to understand the interplay in human life. The life course of an individual is viewed as a phenomenon. It is not only based on his role and behaviour connected with his biological age and stage of development but also linked to his shared relationships and the associated social meaning and interpretation of wider social, historical and cultural trends attached to it across time and space (Elder, 1980). It encompasses 'cohort variations, social class, culture, gender and individual agency' (Hutchinson, 2010: 21).

Basing on the fundamental conception, the life course perspective has been developed by scholars across various schools and disciplines. It has been approached from the perspective of individuals as well as collectives like the family. The life course perspective in the study of the family was propounded by Bengtson and Allen (1993). They viewed it as a 'contextual, processual and dynamic approach' to capture the change in the relationships and roles of individual family members and also family as a social unit over time (Bengtson and Allen, 1993: 492). To explain their perspective they derived four basic assumptions.

The first is the multi-dimensional assumption of time. Ontogenetic time refers to phases of development related to biological age from birth to death. The generational time relates to the 'biogenetic statuses within the family' and the respective roles, expectations and identities attached to it (Bengtson and Allen, 1993: 481). Historical time deals with the transitions in the individual family members and family as a unit over historical periods. Bengtson and Allen argues that the events which occur over these three dimensions of time have an impact on the individual behaviour, their social interaction and also on the social construct of families over time.

The second dimension is the social ecology assumption derived from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979). According to this assumption, the multiple systemic levels within which a family is located, have a direct influence on the events that family members experience over the passage of time. While at the micro-level, individuals' social interactions play a role, cultural values interpret life events at the meso-level and finally, the encompassing macro-structural context have a cohort effect on the family members and also on the family as a social unit placed in the ambit of ontogenetic, generational and historical time (Bengtson & Allen 1993).

The third assumption states that the nature of interaction which occurs over time, period and cohort are dynamic and adapts in accordance to the feedback received from the social structure.

The fourth concept concludes that these interactions and interpretation of social relations occurring over time is heterogeneous in nature and varies by virtue of family diversity and structural factors (Bengtson & Allen 1993).

White and Klein (2002) in their work have also focused on life course theory in relation to the family but have merged it with the family development theory representing a common framework. They argue that with the passage of time there is a transition in the individual family member, the nature of interaction between family members, the family structure and also the norm set role expectations. Understanding these changes is crucial to identify with the roles and expectations for varied stages of family.

Thus, the life course approach assesses family change by locating it as a micro-social unit (encompassing family level social interactions) within the macro-social (overarching societal ideologies and characteristics) context. It considers that transforming macro-situations i.e. changes in the external environmental factors, effect lives of individual family members and their nature of interactions. This study refers to the multiple meaning of age—biological age, age-cohort and historical age—in the life experiences of women pursuing higher education post marriage, giving pre-eminence to shifting family roles and responsibilities. The research evaluates their reasons for

pursuing higher education and their nature of social interaction with family members assessing its impact on the structural construct of family as a unit across time.

## **The Research Context**

### *Status of Education among Indian Women*

In the ancient times, during the Rig Vedic period, women in the Indian sub-continent enjoyed their liberty, right to access education and position in society. But with passing days, in the later Vedic period, their lives gradually became restricted to the private sphere of household chores. A strict code of conduct setting behaviour norms was prescribed. Several social evils like polygamy, child marriage, sati and female infanticide were practiced rampantly. Even though the medieval period witnessed the emergence of strong women leaders like Razia Sultana, Chand Bibi, Durgavati, Mirabai and Nur Jahan, the position of common women was low and dismal. Education was not encouraged among the masses, only few girls belonging to the rich families could attain basic and religious education.

Once again, education of women in India gathered momentum only in the 1920s in the midst of immense social and political awakening. The rise of women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Cornelia Sorabji, Kasturba Gandhi, Ramabai Ranade and Kamala Nehru among others boosted its significance. National leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant and Jawaharlal Nehru, also stood up for the cause. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (Kumar and Sangeeta, 2013) once said,

*'If you educate a man, you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered.'*

This impetus given to women's education continued post-independence too. A new turning point came in 1986 with the formulation of the New Educational Policy, which conceptualized the role of education of women as a prime factor ensuring equality among the sexes (Gore, 1988). Not only in the legal, civil and economic spheres but also within the family, education was seen as a pivotal element which provided greater decision making authority to the woman and altered her status in society. A significant eminence was given to the higher education of women (Chanana, 2001). From 1971 to 2001, the percentage of literate women in India increased from 22% to 54.16% (Census 2001). Thereafter, in 2009, in a landmark decision the Indian Parliament passed the Right to Education Act (RTE) as a fundamental right (Article 21A), guaranteeing free and compulsory education for all children aged between six and fourteen years.

Still, the 15<sup>th</sup> official census (2011) in India concludes that the female literacy rate is merely 65.46% in comparison to male literacy levels which is over 80%. The trend clearly shows that education of women in India continues to face immense struggle. Even though, the value of education is recognized as a stepping stone for women's social mobility, empowerment and development, multiple challenges have come forth in its path of fulfilment. The root of this discrepancy can be traced to the social construction of women in India. Within the dominant patrilineal and patrilocal family structure, the girl is seen as 'parayadhan' (someone else's property). Therefore, her whole socialization process remains constructed as one long preparation to be a good wife and a good mother.

Among the lower socio-economic wrung of society, the prevalence of gender orientation in the domestic tasks within the household and child marriage often leads to high incidence of non-

enrolment and dropping out from school of young adolescent girls (Nair, 1983; Karlekar, 1985; Manjeshwar and Rayappa, 1986; Sundari, 2008). Their higher education is the last thing on the minds of the parents (Bagchi et al. 1997; Das and Biswas, 2006; Sundari, 2008; Sekhar and Hatti, 2010; Shivalli et al, 2010).

Girls belonging to higher socio-economic class still have a chance of college education. However, its relevance remains restricted to a good groom hunting. Parents would rather spend on dowries for girls than on their higher education (Chanana, 2007). There are very few parents who actually encourage higher education among women for their social upliftment and economic independence (Chanana, 2001).

### **Marriage and Education**

Marriage is an essential component in the life of every Indian girl. Remaining single is hardly ever an option. In fact, early marriage is preferred for Indian girls. According to Census 2011, the mean age for effective marriage for female is 21.2 years. To make matters worse, the right to choose a groom is also a dream for many. The state of women's autonomy in the Indian society has also been highlighted in the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in 2004-05 and then in 2011-12. The panel survey covered a nationally representative sample including over 40,000 households across 31 states in India. The reports revealed serious constraints in women empowerment. It showed that only 59 per cent women had a say in their own marriage. Just 18 per cent of the sample knew their husbands before marriage. While assessing the decision making pattern of women in the marital home, only 10 per cent women agreed that they could take the primary decision to buy large items for the house, less than 20 per cent had their names registered on the house's papers and 81 per cent needed permission to visit a doctor. It was reported that 60 per cent of women—including 59 per cent of upper caste Hindus and 83 per cent of Muslim women—practiced some form of 'purdah' or 'ghunghat'. Over half of all women said it was common for women in their community to be beaten if they went out without permission (The Hindu, NCAER).

In such situations, pursuing education post marriage is a challenging task for the Indian women. Yet, scholars have hardly investigated on how marriage affects women's education, except few who argue that early marriage/childbearing and parenthood have a negative impact on women's attainment of education after marriage (Teachman & Polonko, 1988; Hofferth et al., 2001; Hango & Bourdais, 2007). Some studies have concluded that student role being highly time consuming and financially viable, is always in conflict with family life (Blossfeld & Huinink 1991; Thornton et al. 1995; Raymo, 2003). Therefore, many have argued that the successful youth tend to delay marriage and parenthood to accomplish higher education and professional growth (Shanahan, 2000; Furstenberg, 2010).

But these investigations are set in the Western socio-cultural context; there is hardly culture specific studies examining how women post marriage balance their student and family roles in search for their identities. One such work portrayed by Yingchun Ji (2013) emphasizes on the role of family support in the lives of young Nepalese women combining family and student life post marriage. It highlights the transition patterns in the family behaviour treading its path into the existing cultural milieu of gender inequality.

This research looks into unique negotiation that Indian women make to combine their educational and family life. The study also examines the nature of interactions between family

members and the changing family structure set in a patrilocal living arrangement across two generations of women.

### **Research Methodology**

The study encompasses the multiple changing dimensions of women's experience of pursuing higher education post-marriage from a phenomenological perspective. The approach used is hermeneutical phenomenology where the 'lived experiences' of these women have been described and interpreted in the form of a composite essence (Creswell, 2007).

Thirty women were sampled through snow ball sampling method from the Indian metropolitan cities of Mumbai and Kolkata. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Each interview lasted for around 90 minutes. Initially very few women came forward to participate in the study, hence to initiate rapport building I shared my experiences and perspective on pursuing education post marriage. This helped the respondents to open up. However, care was taken to ensure that my views did not influence or prejudice their opinions.

The interviews began with a few questions seeking demographic information. Thereafter, the discussions flowed in the form of a conversation. Two primary questions were asked during the interviews which included a detailed description of 'what' the participants' experienced of the phenomenon and 'how' they experienced it. The interviews were carried out over a period of two months from February through April 2014.

The interviews were conducted in English and Bengali depending on the comfort of the respondents. Later it was translated into English and typed. Microsoft Excel was employed to organize the analysis of the transcripts. The transcripts were read and re-read multiple times to identify the themes and concepts. These statements were then thematically arranged to get an overall essence about the impact of historical time on the 'lived experiences' of these two generation women pursuing education post marriage. The analysis highlighted significant quotations providing an understanding about the participants' experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

### **The Setting**

Located on the western coast of India, Mumbai is the most populated city in the country. It is also known as the commercial capital and offers a diverse cosmopolitan culture. Kolkata, on the other hand, is located on eastern part of India, on the banks of River Hoogly. It is the third most populous city and the financial hub of eastern and north-east India. It has a history of rich cultural heritage and embracing a multi-ethnic outlook. Both cities are cosmopolitan business centres with multiple commonalities in the characteristics of their population. Therefore, the sample did not portray regional differences.

All respondents had been born and brought up in a multi-ethnic city life and were exposed to the influence of Western culture and globalization. There were two age-cohorts taken into account—participants who had been students post marriage in the time frame of 1980-90 and those currently pursuing higher education, 2010 onwards. All respondents had either completed their education or were currently studying in universities in Mumbai and Kolkata.

The composition of the former group of respondents included 10 Hindus, 3 Muslims and 2 Christian participants. Their mean age was 52 years. They have been married on an average for 30 years and were residing in the cities of Mumbai and/or Kolkata with their marital family at the

time of the interview. The annual family income of the respondents was approximately ₹1,200,000 (\$18720). Among the fifteen participants only four were presently working and had an average annual income of ₹ 800,000 (\$12480).

The latter segment of participants constituted of 9 Hindus, 4 Muslims and 2 Christian respondents. Their mean age was 32 years. On an average the participants had been married for 5 years. The participants selected for the study are presently residing in metropolitan cities of Mumbai and/or Kolkata. While seven respondents were staying in their marital home, five were residing in university hostels and three were inhabiting with their parents when the interview was conducted. The average family income of the younger generation was approximately ₹700,000 (\$10,920). Only two participants were currently not earning and the rest had a mean annual income of ₹280,000 (\$4,370).

### **Women's Views**

All of the women interviewed had completed their high school before getting married. Post marriage they had accomplished/or pursuing their college and university education. Some of the participants had gone ahead to pursue their doctorate degree. The women's attitude and expectations were largely influenced by the broader social structure but the nature of family interaction at the micro-level played a crucial role in the perception and interpretation of their experience.

#### *The Older Cohort*

Women saw education as an important stepping stone to gain social mobility in their personal development (such as their status in the marital home). Seema<sup>2</sup> (homemaker, age 45), whose husband is a banker and have two grown-up daughters, said:

I got married 30 years back, at that time I had merely completed my high school. Then, within the first year of marriage I gave birth to a daughter. But I always knew that I would not give up my education. I felt it was essential to be valued by my family and society at large. So I challenged myself and in spite of all responsibilities I completed my graduation and post-graduation.

Jyoti (homemaker, age 55), whose husband is an engineer and have a son and a daughter well settled in their lives, also commented,

During our time, most parents wanted their daughters to be married the moment they touched their twenties. I was no different. I had just completed my high school when I was expected to tie the knot with someone whom I had seen only once. I was not at all ready. I wanted to have a career. I had seen my mother and my aunts how they hardly had a say at home because of their poor educational qualification. I did not want to end up like them so I challenged my situation and with determination went onto complete my university degree.

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<sup>2</sup> Names have been changed to protect identity.

The timing of Nisha's life transitions had long-lasting consequences in the form of effects of subsequent transitions (Elder, 1998). She is 45 years old, an entrepreneur, married to a doctor and blessed with a daughter and a son. Her life experience was dissimilar in comparison to the other participants in the same age cohort.

I had a love marriage so before marriage I had told my husband that I wanted a career too. So I continued my education after my marriage, did our family planning accordingly so that I could have a career of my own.

Set in a similar macro-environment, the diversities in the micro-setting in the form of family interactions gave varied interpretation to Rita's (homemaker, age 50) life transitions. She shared another unique experience,

I was never good in my studies and so in those days my parents got me married right after high school. But after marriage my husband felt that I must at least complete my graduation. So I took admission in a college.

Motivation for a full-time career was not so evident among this age cohort. Very few women linked education to career. The notion of acquiring education had strong relations with the women's search for identity. Every woman had her story to tell. While some women shared experiences of emancipation and family support, others had stories of struggles and challenges to relate. Internal family rules played a crucial role in the women's life experiences.

Rani always wanted to study further so before her marriage was arranged her family talked about her desire to continue her education to her in-laws and they agreed.

The situation is very different when you want to study after marriage. Before, my responsibility was to study and my parents were so supportive. But after marriage, even if I was studying, I was expected to take all other responsibilities. I had to finish all the household work and there was no compromise on that front.

Raima (social worker, age 48) related an incident which continues to disturb her.

I still remember vividly, it was the evening before my final year graduation exam. It was a Sunday and I was studying. So in the evening my husband offered that he would make a cup of tea for himself and for me. I agreed. But then my mother-in-law created such a scene that I still feel it would have been much better had I prepared that cup of tea and maintained peace at home. I could hardly study and my whole evening was wasted.

Shared relationships in Romi's (school teacher, age 45) family had critical impact on her life experiences. For Romi, her married sister-in-law along with her mother-in-law made her experience of pursuing education post marriage very strenuous.

My sister-in-law lives abroad and has a flourishing career. In those days too, she was working. But still knowing that I was having my exams she came to stay with us for a month with her family. With guests at home I really had to struggle to



manage. Though, my husband sometimes helped me secretly so my mother-in-law and sister-in-law would not know about it but never spoke a word in front of them.

The family structure influenced family relationships which had a long lasting impact on the experiences of individual family members. At the time of the interview, Rashi was working in a corporate and living with her husband. Her children were well-settled in life. She reported that it was only after marriage that she had completed her Masters and Doctorate. While she was pursuing her Masters she lived with her in-laws but later during her Ph.D. shifted to their own apartment.

My experiences in both situations were very different. I still took care of my in-laws as they lived nearby. But staying in a nuclear family I had much more freedom. I could manage my time more effectively and concentrate on my studies. However, the best part was a transition in my husband's behaviour. He began helping me in the household work. Our communication improved, we took our own decisions. I am not against joint families but in my case being in a nuclear family really assisted me to build a career.

Women felt that a nuclear family system was better for pursuing their education. Their concept of nuclear families usually consisted of young couples and their children. In most cases, the parents and in-laws visited from time to time. With the authority of decision making entrusted to young couples, these matrimonial homes provided a safer and emancipating environment for the women.

In spite of the various constraints in their 'social and historical circumstances' these women had constructed their own life course through their choices and actions, transforming hindrances into opportunities (Elder, 1998: 4). They also pointed out, though their situation was much better compared to their mothers, their daughters strived for greater independence and had more choice on how to live their lives.

Namrata (entrepreneur, age 48 years), has a married daughter pursuing her doctorate post marriage, spoke about changing identities,

I got married very early and completed my graduation after marriage. In those days I faced a lot of challenges and difficulties for developing a career. I compromised and adjusted because that was what I thought was right. Now, when I see young women, like my daughter, studying and pursuing her career post marriage I feel that it is not that the family support has increased drastically. She continues to struggle in her marital home but her motivation is much higher. She is determined to prove herself in her career too.

Nilisha (homemaker, age 47 years), stays in a joint family with her in-laws, husband and children. She shared about her situation in relation to her mother.

Yes, I feel I am definitely better placed than my mother in my marital home. My mother got married at the age of sixteen. She was studying in the eighth standard. She always wanted to study further but was stopped by my father and other elderly people at home. She had no decision making power and had to depend on

my father for everything. Even if she had to visit my maternal grandparents she had to take permission. Yes, I struggled to pursue my higher education post marriage but at least I had the support of my husband and managed to complete it. But then I had a son and no one was ready to keep him when I went for work so I had to give up on my plans for a career.

Most elder generation women complained that their social conditioning and early marriages stifled their confidence. From childhood they had been convinced that their goal in life was to be an obedient wife, a dutiful daughter-in-law and a good mother. Career was never a priority. So, parents support for professional growth was also minimal. Hence, very few could make their way to a successful career. However, these women proudly asserted that as mothers they had brought up their daughter with strong motivation to aspire for a career. They have supported them to nurture their lives and make appropriate choices.

### *The Younger Cohort*

The girls presently pursuing higher education post marriage revealed that establishing a career was one of the primary objectives for their struggle. Julie (M.Phil. student and part time lecturer, age 34), whose husband is a banker and has two young daughters, pointed out,

I worked for five years after marriage and then I started studying. This is only because I want a growth in my career. It is essential for my own identity no matter what struggle I face I know what I want,

For Priya, characteristics of family and nature of family interactions altered over time (Elder, 1998). Life transitions were evident with ontogenetic time (developmental levels from birth to death of an individual) and social time (transitions in social relationships over time). What seemed impossible in her 20s became possible at the age of 45 when Priya returned to university to complete her dream, her post-graduation degree.

I always wanted to study further and have my dream career but I was forced to marry after graduation and my mother-in-law refused to let me study so when she went abroad to live with my sister-in-law, I felt like pursuing my dream once again. Motivated by my daughters, I took admission for my post-graduation.

For Rimi (pursuing Ph.D., age 29), her timing of marriage and her choices and actions helped her to have a smooth transition,

I am a career woman. I was studying when I got married so afterwards I continued with my course work. It was in no way different for me.

Since attaining education and fulfilling family roles contradicted each other, women tried utilizing the environmental opportunities while making their personal choices. Ria, age 25, a Masters student, commented

I know that I want a career and so I am studying further to strengthen my goal. But monetary security has been a major concern for me. Probably I would not have studied had I not been receiving a stipend.

Even though women shared similar cultural values, their reasons for pursuing higher education were multiple, varying with their interpretation of life events. Their interdependence on familial, social and historical influences coloured their perspectives. The younger generation, were more concerned and focussed on a career unlike their older cohort. There was clarity in their ambitions and course of action. For them, education was the stepping stone for a secure professional life and career growth.

But participating in higher education after marriage had always been and continues to be a difficult and challenging task for women.

Studying is always so demanding unlike working which is a nine to five job; yet at all times I am made to believe that what is the use of a wife if she is not heating the food for the husband. Every morning while I rush to make breakfast, pack our lunch boxes and finish all household work before leaving for university, my husband sits and reads the newspaper with a cup of tea in luxurious manner. He does not even feel bad looking at me struggling. Even if he wants to help my in-laws will pounce on him stating that this is not his work. Sometimes burdened with housework and studies I feel so stressed out that I feel like leaving everything behind and run away. (Piyali, pursuing Ph.D., age, 30 years)

A major setback in attainment of education post marriage was childbearing. The timing of this life event was deemed significant in shaping a woman's life course. Reena (pursuing M.Phil., age 29 years), with a year old toddler, noted,

I was in my first year of M.Phil, when I conceived by chance. Since it was a difficult pregnancy I had to take a break. Once my daughter was born, I thought I would go back to my studies. But juggling between career and child care was almost impossible. Even though my husband is very supportive but he has a demanding work schedule so I had to extend my break. He is not ready to compromise his career for childcare.

Niti (pursuing Masters degree, age 26) too echoed similar concerns,

While pursuing my Masters I gave birth to a daughter and my in-laws were not in favour of having a nanny so I moved to my parents' home and currently residing there while completing my degree. My husband has helped me in the negotiation but after completing my education I shall have to return, I do not know how I will manage to work then.

The nature of family interaction and support was influenced by social and historical norms and stereotypes. Even though, diversity was evident, certain attitudes and behaviours were repetitive. Reba, a 25 year old university student related her story

My husband's support has very crucial role in my education. He convinced his parents and I was permitted to leave home and continue my education at 'x' college in a different city. I currently stay in the hostel. Still, no matter how forward they are, at home I am always expected to do the household work. My mother-in-law never allows my husband to help me at all. For her, housework is not for men. If I don't help she grumbles, but he is excused from everything.

Most women opined that their husbands provided a strong support system but the presence of in-laws negatively altered their behaviour. Internal family beliefs and rules reflecting the macro-social and cultural norms continued to impact women's lived experiences. For example, most women shared that the role of the husband was not associated with household chores, it was viewed as the wife's domain which she was expected to fulfil under any circumstances. Though the situation had improved in the favour of younger age-cohort, this view cut across historical time, irrespective of the family structure.

The youth were more vocal about their concerns and tried to negotiate their situations. Among the younger generation, women were much more confident of themselves. They treasured their independence and upheld their own motivation and will power.

Rachna, stayed in a nuclear family with her husband and two years old daughter.

Even though my in-laws stay nearby whenever I go to college I prefer to keep my daughter in the crèche. I do not want to depend on my in-laws for child support. I have to work more this way but I enjoy my peace of mind and my independence.

New forms of relationships were emerging to accommodate the women's aspiration for higher education post marriage. Sabiha, who has been staying in a hostel for the last two years to complete her Masters' degree shared,

My husband and I do not strongly believe in long distance relationship but we are fine if we are required to stay separate for a few years for our career growth. Even though, my in-laws were not very happy about this arrangement but my husband convinced them.

Increasing self-assertiveness and drive have helped women to pave their path for professional growth and development even in the face of multiple challenges. For Christina retorts,

My husband refuses to pay for my tuitions. He also does not pay for the crèche where my children stay. So I have taken up a part time job to meet these expenses. I am determined to complete my doctorate no matter how bad situations are.

The spaces and boundaries in the lives of these women have undergone certain transitions over the years. The younger cohort reflected greater self-assertiveness in their search for an identity. However, these changing identities were not formed in vacuum. Various external factors played a pivotal role in facilitating these transitions. For example, opening of multiple day care centres have been identified as great assets for women pursuing a professional career. It greatly reduced the dependence on in-laws or parents for child rearing and support. The life course theory

echoes these assumptions while signifying the social context in relation to family interactions. This was what Bronfenbrenner (1979) termed as the 'social ecology of development'.

The concepts of age, cohort and period (historical time) played a significant role in the life course analysis (White and Klein, 2003). According to the life course theory, social systems and norms regulating family interaction and individual roles and behaviour altered over time. In this study, it was evident that the family is deviating from its institutional norms to adjust and accommodate other institutional norms such as education. New family structures were emerging like long distance relationships. Many women among the younger cohort were staying in hostels to continue their higher education post marriage. The idea of long distance relationship for participation in higher education was unthinkable among the older cohort. With the process of globalization and other macro-economic and social transitions there were increasing inclinations of urban women joining the workforce. This too was reflected in the focused attitudes among the youth. Though, the nature of behaviour within cohorts was dynamic in nature inter-group trends were noticeable (Bengston and Allen, 1993).

### **The Impact of Education on Women of Both Cohorts**

All women irrespective of their distinctive cohorts realized the value of education and the significant difference it made to their ability to make future decisions both in their personal (in their marital relationships) and professional (career path) life.

Education gave me the self-confidence to make decisions. I am not working but whenever anyone asks me how far I have studied, I can confidently give my answer. I feel proud of myself. If I had stopped studying after completing my high school I don't think I would have happy about myself. (Pinky, age 50, married with two grown-up, well settled boys)

Education helped women to improve their position in the family home. It brought equality in their relationships and gave recognition to their identity. Rita (entrepreneur, age 43), lives in a joint family with her husband, daughter, son, father-in-law, brother-in-law and his wife. She felt

Education has enhanced my value in the family home. My opinions are taken more seriously at home than my sister-in-law because I am more educated than her. Even though I struggled while studying but the end result has been rewarding.

Other respondents echoed similar responses,

Initially my in-laws did not take my education seriously. They felt I was studying doctorate because I could not find a job. But with time I felt I was more valued at home. My in-laws and husband started helping me in the household work so that I could give enough time to my studies. (Rupa, pursuing doctorate, age 29)

Individuals and their social roles within a family setting alter across generational time. The feedback from a preceding event impacts the reaction to a following one (Bengston and Allen,

1993). Rani, now a mother-in-law, had been victim of family pressure and had to give up on hopes of a career but she had dreams for her daughter-in-law,

I had struggled a lot to complete my law degree after my marriage. I did not even get the opportunity to work. But now my daughter-in-law is studying and I support her completely. I want her to fulfil the dreams which I could not.

For Indian women, accomplishing higher education was a 'life event' which altered their life course. It had an impact on the nature of interaction within family relations. It reformed their perceptions in the long run and the change process was transferred to the next generation. As mothers, the women prompted their off springs to a full-fledged professional career, which they were unable to attain. In this investigation, the effect of pursuing higher education was more prominently evident among the older cohort group. For the youth, it was still a continuing process.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, the experiences among the two age-cohorts of pursuing higher education post-marriage, have been varied and diverse. However, at all stages, the social construction of women pushed her into stereotypical roles within the family. Burden of child rearing and household management was borne by the women. In a joint family set-up, these expectations were scaled up. Since the in-laws were the primary decision makers within the household her negotiating powers were further diminished. Women within nuclear family structure enjoyed increased independence and autonomy to make choices. The Indian husband was mostly supportive of the wife's participation in higher education and career but failed to assist her in the presence of his parents. Hence, preference for nuclear family structure was a predominant view. Internal family norms regulated the women's lived experiences to a certain extent.

The stereotypical concept of division of labour continued to stress women with dual responsibilities—family and work. Since the women's income was considered to be supplementary, expectation of maintaining work-life balance was heavily skewed for the female population. The burden of child birth and rearing was borne by women with minimal assistance from the male partner. In many instances, if the parents stayed in close proximity, the women reported having a stronger support system.

Across generations, linkages in family relationships and interactions were evident. But the families, as active agents of change, were gradually transforming to become more accommodative for women's career. Newer forms of family structures like long distance marriages were more common among the youth. Another aspect which revealed itself in the course of the study was that the older cohort group women, as mothers, in response to their own struggle, nature of family interactions and macro-social transitions, prioritized professional career among their daughters.

As the women transited through generational and historical time their perceptions and individual behaviours underwent a change which was mirrored in the 'lived experience' of the youth. The younger generation women emanated confidence and self-assertiveness while the older women tend to compromise and adjust to their environment. The youth reflected poise in their attitude and were persistent about their profession and their desire for growth. They were ready to struggle against all odds. This in turn, played a primary role in the gradual revolution of family relations, interaction and structure.

The inter-cohort varied perceptions were not only impacted by personal insight, but also influenced by other factors beyond their own self. As the life course perspective showcases, the behaviour of a person is connected not only to a person's own life course, but also impacted by the environment at micro, meso and macro levels set in the cycle of historical time. Post 1991, with the liberalization of economic policies, globalization emerged in the Indian market. Urban hubs witnessed phenomenal growth. Commercialization and marketization boomed the economy. As employment trends altered, increasing number of women joined the workforce (Hensman, 2004; Shah, 2007; Richards & Gelleny, 2007). The younger age-cohort being a product of their time portrayed greater emphasis on professional growth and career aspirations.

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